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THE AVOIDANCE OF ABSOLUTE COMMITMENT
IN SPEECH ACTS: MODALITY

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition:
Teaching English as a Second Language

by
Deborah Kay Leavell

June 2003

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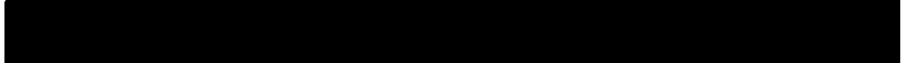
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ABSTRACT

Grice (1990), in his Cooperative Principle, proposes that speakers engaged in discourse may assume mutually cooperative truth. Yet, in daily discourse, we observe occasions in which speakers of English seemingly attempt to avoid absolute commitment to the propositional truth in their speech. In this context, I propose that speakers of English intend to avoid absolute commitment through their use of *modality*.

After defining *speaker commitment* as it pertains to propositional truth in speech acts and exploring influences and motivations that may affect speaker commitment, this thesis will introduce and define modality in the context of actual speech. The scope of modality will then be narrowed to a focus on core and periphrastic modals. Specifically, discussion of these modals will include their identification and meanings/functions. Finally, a survey of commitment and truth in common modal usage will be presented. The survey's findings will particularly address the following questions: Do speakers express absolute commitment through modal usage? What modals do speakers perceive to convey the strongest and weakest

degrees/meanings of commitment? Do speakers prefer the directness of the positive assertion *can* or the distant, albeit polite form *could* when speaking commitment? Does the usage of *can* versus *could* change the degree/meaning of commitment in speech? How do speakers' perceptions of commitment through the use of the modal *will* relate to relationships between speakers and hearers? Are age, gender, native language, and/or occupation relational to the degree and/or propositional truth of commitment in speech? Is the speaker's perception of his/her level of commitments consistent with or variant to the speaker's reported actual keeping of commitments? Lastly, is the phrasal modal *need to* spoken consistently in daily discourse to mean literally necessity? Following survey Findings and Summary, a Discussion of General and Teaching English as a Second Language implications² is presented.

Key words: commitment, modality, relationship, gender, age, native language, and statistics.

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CHAPTER ONE

COMMITMENT IN SPEECH ACTS

When we speak or write, we are rarely very clear, precise, or explicit about what we mean...but are, on the contrary, vague, indirect, and unclear about just what we are committed to. (Stubbs, 1986, p.1)

Introduction

The axiom "A man is as good as his word" and the Biblical admonition "Let your yea be yea, and your nea, nea" (James 5:12) traditionally have been common principles governing daily English conversation. Accordingly, Grice (1990), in his Cooperative Principle, proposes that speakers engaged in discourse may assume mutually cooperative truth. Yet, in daily discourse, we observe occasions in which speakers of English seemingly attempt to avoid absolute commitment to the propositional truth in their speech. Consider the following examples of actual speech. On December 12, 2001 (5:00 PM), Peter Jennings presaged his evening topic for ABC's World News Tonight, "Tanzanite, the popular gem that may be funding terrorism." Effectively, Jennings implies to his audience a plausible link between tanzanite and terrorism without committing

himself to the truth of an actual link. Similarly, in a conversation between two musicians, Musician A apprises her colleague (B), "Practice is Saturday morning at 9:00, but don't quote me." Thus, Musician A overtly states that practice is scheduled for 9:00 AM, while seemingly attempting to elude commitment to the truth of a 9:00 AM practice by adding to her statement "but don't quote me." In yet a third example, a middle-aged lady (C) tells a friend, "I will be there (a friend's birthday celebration)." Not long after, (C) tells a co-worker that she will be going to the birthday party (referenced above) unless she can get tickets to a concert, which is the same night as the party. Upon contemplation of these given examples, I set forth two questions: if, as in the first two examples, we as speakers of English (SsE) circumvent commitment to propositional truth in our speech, do we genuinely practice speaking cooperatively in mutual commitment to truth? Further, if, as in the third example, we speak commitment, but do not intend commitment, do we subtly lie?

In this context, I propose that speakers of English intend to avoid absolute commitment in their use of *modality*. Further, 1) I will specifically demonstrate that

speakers of English use *will*, the modal to which "absolute commitment" is ascribed in linguistic theory, for an intended meaning of relative commitment; moreover, sociocultural variables such as speaker-addressee relationship and age significantly impact speaker commitment in his/her speech acts. 2) I will investigate how speakers apply modality in order to distance themselves from an absolute commitment to the verity of their speech.

Within this first chapter, I will define speaker commitment as it directly relates to propositional truthfulness in speech acts and progress to a discussion of pragmatic and sociolinguistic factors that may influence a speaker's commitment in his/her speech acts.

In chapter 2, modality will be introduced and defined in the context of actual speech surrounding the 2000 Presidential Election. The scope of modality will then be narrowed to the identification and function/meaning of core and periphrastic modals. The discussion will present current grammar and research theory that asserts absolute poles of commitment in modal usage.

Chapter 3 will present the results of a survey of commitment and truth in common modal usage obtained by sampling in a variety of contexts will be presented. The

survey's findings will particularly address the following questions: Do speakers express absolute commitment through modal usage? What modals do speakers perceive to convey the strongest and weakest degrees/meanings of commitment? Do speakers prefer the directness of the positive assertion *can* or the distant, albeit polite form *could* when speaking commitment? Does the usage of *can* versus *could* change the degree/meaning of commitment in speech? How do speakers' perceptions of commitment through the use of the modal *will* relate to relationships between speakers and hearers? Are age, gender, native language, and/or occupation relational to the degree and/or propositional truth of commitment in speech? Are speakers' perceptions of their level of commitments consistent with or variant to their reported actual keeping of commitments? Secondly, to investigate propositional truth in modal usage, I ask, is the phrasal modal *need to* spoken consistently in daily discourse to mean literally *necessity*?

Commitment

A discussion of commitment in speech acts would be remiss without careful definition and pragmatic examination of *commitment* as it pertains to propositional truthfulness

in speech acts. Therefore, I posit and strive to answer the following: What is commitment? What constitutes commitment in speech acts? What pragmatic and sociolinguistic factors influence a speaker's commitment to truth in his/her speech? Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1959) defines *commitment* as "a promise or pledge" (p. 166). The American Heritage Dictionary (1997) further explicates that *commitment*, in addition to a pledge, is "the state of being bound emotionally or intellectually..." (p. 281). Moreover, Webster's Collegiate Thesaurus (1988) assigns "obligation" (p. 141) as the primary synonym to *commitment*. Thus, by definition, commitment includes a promise or pledge, and as such, is binding as an obligation. Further, commitment, as a promise, "gives to the person to whom it is made a right to expect or to claim" that which is promised (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1959, p. 676). By extending this definition into speech act theory, I submit that *speaker commitment* may be defined as a speaker's *promise* to the propositional truth of his/her utterance, the promise to which the speaker is *emotionally or intellectually bound* and *obligated* in his/her speech. Thereby, the addressee *expects or claims* that the proposition(s) of the speaker's

utterance(s) is true. Comparatively, Grice (1990) proposes that rational conversation requires three cooperative elements: co-operative effort(s), common purpose(s), and mutually accepted direction between speaker(s) and hearer(s) (p. 27). Under the umbrella of this *Co-operative Principle*, Grice, moreover, asserts a maxim of *Quality*, "Try to make your contribution one that is true...Do not say what you believe to be false" and "Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence" (p. 28). Thus, co-operative speakers of English engaged in rational conversation expect mutually co-operative truth; i.e., speaker commitment to the propositional truth in his/her speech. In stark contrast, Aristotle defines the antithesis of commitment to truth, i.e., a *lie*, as "a statement of that which is that it is not, or of that which is not that it is" (Washington, 1991, p. 28). Citing Frege (1981), Lyon observes diametric antagonists, truth versus lies, in daily conversation and asserts that our words and sentences relate "to truth or falsity, rather than to situations that they purport to describe" (p. 161). Further, Lyon (1981) writes that commitment is "a modal component of factuality versus desirability" (p. 191). However, in pragmatic observation of daily conversation, is

speaker commitment merely an utterance of truth or falsity? Factuality or desirability? What constitutes speaker commitment in our speech acts?

Speaker commitment may be expressed through two primary means. First, and most obviously, speaker commitment may be expressed through the illocutionary act of making a promise. How does a speaker accomplish this act? Searle (1965) posits that all speech acts are governed by *constitutive* and *regulative* rules. The former is a system of semantic rules under which speech acts are performed in the form of "*If x, then y;*" the latter, resembling the equation "*X counts as y,*" regulates existing forms of behavior and interpersonal relationships (p. 117). The speech act of making a promise creates an obligation under regulative rules in the form of *X counts as y*, i.e., certain conditions must obtain. Searle proposes the following requisites for making a sincere promise.

1. Input and Output. "*Normal input and output conditions obtain*" (p. 121), i.e., the utterance must be intelligible speaker output and understood hearer input.
2. Propositional Content. "*S (the speaker) expresses that p (the proposition) in the utterance of T (the*

sentence)," and "in expressing that *p*, *S* predicates a future act *A* of *S*" (p. 121).

3. Preparatory Conditions. "*H* (the hearer) would prefer *S*'s doing *A* to his not doing *A*, and *S* believes *H* would prefer his doing *A* to his not doing *A*."

Additionally, "It is not obvious to both *S* and *H* that *S* will do *A* in the normal course of events" (p. 122).

4. Sincerity Condition. "*S* intends to do *A*" (p. 123).

5. Essential Condition. "*S* intends that the utterance of *T* will place him under an obligation to do *A*" (p. 123).

6. Explication. "*S* intends that the utterance of *T* will produce in *H* a belief that conditions (sincerity and essential) obtain by means of the recognition of the intention to produce that belief, and he intends this recognition to be achieved by means of the recognition of the sentence as one conventionally used to preface such beliefs" (p. 123).

7. Semantic Rules. "The semantical rules of the dialect spoken by *S* and *H* are such that *T* is correctly and sincerely uttered if and only if (all previous) conditions obtain (p. 123).

Of the afore conditions, condition #4 qualifies such promises as sincere. However, we observe in daily English conversation occasions in which an insincere promise is uttered, i.e., the speaker does not intend to do A. For example, S affirms to H, "I promise I will be there (H's party) tomorrow," although, S has other plans and does not intend to go to the party. In such occurrences, does S's insincerity void the uttered commitment? It does not.

In addition to the act of making a sincere promise, speakers of English also make a promise or commitment to the truth of their speech by the mere utterance of their words, regardless of the speaker's sincerity or insincerity, i.e., the very illocution of an utterance obligates the speaker to his/her speech (exception: irony, implicature, sarcasm, metaphors, and the like—See Grice, 1990). Searle (1965) asserts:

To say "I promise to do A" is to take responsibility for intending to do A, and this condition holds whether the utterance was sincere or insincere (p. 124).

Stubbs (1986; cf. Kempson 1977) likewise writes,

Performatives (e.g. I *promise*, I *guarantee*) can be analyzed naturally as reporting propositions, which

are true by virtue of being uttered. If I say that I have promised, even if I have no intention of keeping my promise: the commitment has been made (p. 18).

Moreover, Grice's Co-operative Principle and maxim of Quality may be extended such that the theory of a speaker's obligation to the truth of his/her speech by mere utterance applies not only to performative speech acts, but to non-performative speech acts as well; if I say that *p* is or is not, even if I do not believe that it is or is not, I have verbally made a commitment to the propositional truth in my speech by virtue of its utterance. Consider the following:

- 1) I promise I will come.
- 2) I will come.
- 3) I promise the package was mailed yesterday.
- 4) The package was mailed yesterday.
- 5) I guarantee rehearsal is at 8:00 PM.
- 6) Rehearsal is at 8:00 PM.

Although the illocutionary force, by use of performatives in sentences #1, 3, and 5 above, is stronger than that of sentences #2, 4, and 6; under the Co-operative Principle and the maxim of Quality, the speaker is obligated to utter only that which he/she believes to be true and the hearer expects that the speaker's utterance is true in all six

examples, regardless whether the speaker utters performative or non-performative verbs. Thus, we observe that the act of mere utterance obligates, or promises, the speaker's commitment to his/her speech. Further, drawing upon Searle, I submit that when a speaker utters *T* containing *that p*, and thereby promises to the truth of the speech act, the following conditions obtain regulatively in the form of *X counts as y*.

1. Input and Output. "*Normal input and output conditions obtain*" (Searle, 1965, p. 121), i.e., the utterance is intelligible speaker output and understood hearer input.
2. Propositional Content. "*S (the speaker) expresses that p (the proposition) in the utterance of T (the sentence),*" and "*in expressing that p, S predicates...*" *p* (Searle, 1965, p. 121).
3. Preparatory Condition. *H* does not have reason to believe that *S* is speaking uncooperatively or untruthfully.
4. Sincerity Condition. *S* does not intend *that p* to be implicature, figure of speech, indirect speech, or the like.

5. Essential Condition. Under the maxim of Quality, S's utterance of *that p* in T obligates S to the truth of his/her speech, regardless whether S intends *that p* as truth or not.
6. Explication. S utters *that p* in T; such utterance of T produces in H the belief that S intends his/her speech to be cooperative and truthful, and therefore, also produces in H the belief that S is committed to the truth of his/her speech. S's utterance T is a sentence conventionally used to convey T as truth, thereby leading H to expect S's utterance to be true.
7. Semantic Rules. The semantic rules of the language or dialect spoken by S and H are such that T uttered is a speaker's promise to the truth of T if the previous conditions obtain.

Thus, in accordance with the Co-operative Principle, its supermaxims, and regulative rules which govern speech acts, I conclude that a speaker of English pledges commitment through two observed means: 1) the performative act of making a promise and 2) the mere utterance of non-performative T *that P*. Reciprocally, the addressee expects speaker commitment when either illocutor mean has been uttered.

Influences and Motivations

Having defined speaker commitment as it pertains to propositional truth, and having examined the conditions that constitute such commitment, we turn our attention to explore influences and motivations that may be related to speaker commitment in our speech acts. Sociolinguistically, why might speakers endeavor to circumvent commitment in their speech and to its truth? Pragmatically, upon what occasion(s) and under what circumstance(s) do illocutors intend to elude speaker commitment? What might be achieved or gained when a speaker avoids commitment in his/her speech?

First, the compelling consideration of *politeness* may be observed in daily English conversation. Chen (2001) proposes, "Politeness is a factor that determines what a speaker says and how she says it" (p. 95). Moreover, Brown and Levinson (1987), assert that speakers employ "linguistic strategies" to "face-oriented ends," i.e., politeness (p. 58).

Of politeness, Leech (1983) posits two forms of illocution: *self-politeness* (a speaker's politeness toward himself/herself) and *other-politeness* (a speaker's politeness toward the hearer). Additionally, the theorist

notes that politeness may be expressed toward a third party (present or absent) as an extension of *self* or *other*.

Whether the third party is perceived as an extension of *self* or *other* is culturally relative; i.e., constrained by cultural expectations and norms of language. Moreover, cultural expectations influence the manner of expressing politeness, including esteem versus denigration. For example, an English-speaking host may graciously accept a compliment on a deliciously cooked meal with a "Thank You." However, a Chinese Mandarin speaking host must not only humbly decline the compliment, but also demonstrate *politeness* by denigrating the quality of the meal (viewed culturally as an extension of *self*) with a response such as *It's not so good* or *It's nothing*. In this case, the latter host may or may not be committed to his/her speech of politeness, inwardly knowing that a very generous, extraordinarily delicious meal indeed was served and being most appreciative of the compliment.

Contemporary with Leech, Brown and Levinson (1987) observe that politeness is contingent upon two elements: *rationality* and *face*, specifically *other-face*, i.e., the face of the hearer. *Rationality* is defined as that "precisely definable mode of reasoning from ends to the

means that will achieve those ends" (p. 58). *Face* relates both to the *positive* desire of a person to be accepted and approved of in specific communicative, social situations as well as to a person's *negative* desire to be unimpeded, which includes "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction - i.e., to freedom of action and freedom from imposition" (p. 61). Moreover, Brown and Levinson emphasize: "Face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (p. 61). Thus, *face* is an "high stakes" politeness component, which greatly influences the content of a speaker's utterance as well as the manner in which propositional content is illocuted, including commitment versus non-commitment.

However, in daily conversation, we frequently observe occasions in which a speaker imposes upon his/her hearer's face by uttering a *Face-Threatening Act (FTA)*. For example, a family member's car is in the shop. I live nearby; consequently, this family member asks,

Would you give me a ride to work tomorrow morning?
Her request, though seemingly reasonable, imposes her desire or need upon me, thereby threatening my negative

face and potentially impeding my plan to leave early in the morning for San Diego.

In addition to a speaker's having potential to threaten the face of the hearer (other-face), Chen (2001) observes that the reciprocal also holds true, i.e. the hearer potentially can threaten the face of the speaker or self-face can be threatened. Thus, Chen proposes (in polite modesty), an essential complement to Levinson and Brown's *other-politeness*, the theory of *self-politeness*: "When having to do speech acts that threaten self-face or when self-face is attacked by others, speakers will make efforts to maintain, protect, or enhance self-face, resulting in utterances for the sake of self-politeness." (p. 90) In this context, *self* is defined as the speaker and those with whom the speaker is associated. [e.g., A teacher is one entity among the plurality of aids, fellow colleagues, and administrators of a learning institution; therefore, a teacher's associates and colleagues, as well as the institution itself, may be included in that teacher's concept of "self."] Speech acts that threaten *self-face* (positive or negative) are known as *Self-Face Threatening Acts (SFTA's)*. Consider the following example. A high school principal asks,

Will you (an English teacher) consider giving extra time after school next semester to tutor students in English and math?

However, the teacher has been looking forward to taking piano lessons during that time. A response in the negative, i.e., *I do not agree to commit*, would be potentially *self-face threatening*; for it might contribute to the principal's perceiving the teacher as being non-cooperative or a non-team player (positive self-face threatening). On the other hand, an utterance to commit to tutoring after school would require that the teacher give up treasured personal time and plans to study music (negative self-face threatening).

To further explicate their politeness theories, Brown and Levinson (1987, p.60) and Chen (2001, p.96) assert that speakers employ superstrategies of politeness to determine 1) whether or not they will utter a face-threatening act at all, and if so, 2) the content and manner in which they will illocute the speech act. Table 1.1 below explicates.

Table 1.1. Politeness Superstrategies

<u>Brown and Levinson</u>	<u>Chen</u>
(Relevance: S asks H for commitment in speech act.)	(Relevance: S makes a choice: to commit or not in speech act.)
Less Face Threat	Less Face Threat
1. Baldly. Without redress. On record.	1. Baldly. Without redress. On record.
2. Positive politeness. With redress. On record.	2. *With redress. On record.
3. Negative politeness. With redress. On record.	
4. Off record.	3. Off record.
5. Withhold FTA.	4. Withhold SFTA.
Great Face Threat	Great Face Threat
Superstrategy determined by estimation of:	Superstrategy determined by estimation of:
1. The want to communicate the content of FTA x.	1. Degree self-face is threatened by other.
2. The want to be efficient/urgent.	A. Degree of confrontation (continuum).
3. The want to maintain Hearer's face to any degree.	B. Gravity of FTA threat by other.
(Brown and Levinson, 1987)	1) FTA Severity.
	2) FTA Directness.
	2. Degree self-face threatened by SFTA.
	A. SFTA Severity.
	B. SFTA Consequence.
	(Chen, 2001)

(*Chen does not distinguish between negative and positive face, a distinction of *kind*, rather than *degree*. Additionally, Chen notes that negative and positive face apply to all superstrategies whether on or off record.)

In Table 1.1 above, we observe that the superstrategies for other and self-politeness are complementary. In situations which speakers perceive to be non-confrontational or minimally consequential, speakers may choose to utter

"baldly" FTA's or SFTA's; e.g. a congenial, "Excuse me," (SFTA) or a simple request/reply:

A: When you get a moment, could you lend me a quick hand? (FTA)

B: I'd be happy to. (SFTA)

From the latter example, we note specifically that B's speech act is a baldly uttered commitment to help A.

In a situation of slightly increased potential for face threat, speakers may choose to utter FTA's or SFTA's "with redress" in an attempt to mitigate unfavorable and unwanted positive or negative-face results. Chen suggests that such redress may include, but not be limited to, the following: justification, contradiction, hedging, impersonalization, humor, confident speech, modest speech, hesitance, or conditions appended to the SFTA to the utterance (p. 99). [Note: All but direct contradiction may apply to an FTA.] Specific to SFTA's, Chen notes that the first five speaker options (justification, contradiction, hedging, impersonalization, and humor) are positive strategies employed usually when a speaker has acted thoughtlessly or committed a faux pas. In such utterances a speaker will admit to the offence, adding to the admission justification, a humorous remark, etc. When

needing to portray a strong, capable self-image, such as at a job interview, the speaker attempts to use speech that suggests self-confidence. On the other hand, a speaker who does not want to seem arrogant (which also might be perceived as a threat to *other*--a potential for *other* attack against *self*) may choose to modestly minimize himself/herself. Hesitation and conditional addendums are *negative* strategies used by a speaker (*self*) when *other* imposes upon *self*, such that *self* would potentially lose *self-face* or realize unfavorable consequences should *self* not agree to the imposition, e.g. a university administrator strongly urges a professor of English to speak at a CATESOL conference forum, rather than to attend a long anticipated L.A. Laker's game. In response, the professor may hedge or hesitate to commit to speaking at the conference, or the professor may commit on the condition "If my job depends on it, I will do it" or "Only if no one else is available will I do it."

Of particular relevance to the present thesis, each of the previous nine options of Chen's second superstrategy are particularly applicable to commitment in speech acts. The following examples illustrate.

Justification: We're sorry that it's taking a little longer than expected. We will have it finished by 5:00; we've just been swamped today.

Contradiction: I said that I would go, but I really didn't commit to it.

Hedge: We will probably go to the game.

Impersonalization: Boss: Will you please see that this project gets done correctly?

Employee: It will be tough to meet these specifications.

Humor: Supervisor: Can you fix it?

Worker: Did Greenbay win the Superbowl?

Confidence: I will take care of the matter; I know the client well.

Modesty: Student: I don't understand this concept.

Can you help me?

Tutor: I might know a little about it.

Hesitation: I have a 9:00 and a 10:00
(appointment); I'll see if I can
swing by about 11:30.

Conditions: Parent: It's time to do your
homework.

Child: I'll do it only because
I have to.

Upon occasions in which the threat to face is high, speakers may opt to employ a third super strategy, that is, to utter FTA's or SFTA's "off-record" or to be elusive on-record. As a primary means of doing so, Chen asserts that speakers strive to implement implicature and other implied speech, flouting Grice's maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and/or Manner. The purpose, Chen writes, "is obvious: by doing the SFTA at the what-is-implied level rather than at the what-is-said level, the speaker would avoid damaging self-face" (p. 101).

Additionally, as the degree of threat to face increases, I propose that speakers specifically use modality as a means to circumvent commitment in their implied speech. Peter Jennings' statement, "Tanzanite, the popular gem that may be funding terrorism," (quoted in this paper's opening paragraph) illustrates well Chen's argument

of elusiveness and the use of modality to achieve that end. As a journalist, Jennings is cognizant that he and his television network (*self*) are liable for the accuracy or inaccuracy of his statement(s). Moreover, being on-record and not desiring to lose face for violating the maxim of Quality (i.e., stating as fact that for which one lacks sufficient evidence to declare to be true), Jennings chooses to distance himself from the truth of his proposition by using the modal *may* rather than baldly committing, "Tanzanite, the popular gem that is funding terrorism." Thus, Jennings 1) effectively proposes by implication, through the use of modality, a link between tanzanite and terrorism, 2) escapes accountability for the truthfulness of his proposition, and thereby, 3) preserves *self-face*, i.e., precludes or mitigates *other* attack against *self*. In sum, following a non-committal politeness superstrategy was less self-face threatening than absolute commitment in his speech.

When estimating the weightiness of an FTA, Brown and Levinson suggest that the speaker factors three sociological variables: *social distance*, *relative power*,

and the ranking of impositions in the particular culture expressed through the following formula:

$$W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x.$$

In other words, the weight of the face-threatening act x equals the social distance (D) of the speaker (S) to the hearer (H), plus the relative power (P) of the hearer over the speaker, plus the absolute ranking (R) of impositions in the particular culture. In this equation, social distance is a non-power, horizontal measurement of speaker/hearer identity and relationship (friend/friend, acquaintance/acquaintance, colleague/colleague, parent/parent, etc.), whereas relative power indicates the vertical or hierarchical role value of one participant over the other (captain/private, employer/employee, parent/child, teacher/student, etc.). Additionally, the appropriateness of a speech act according to cultural expectations for a particular office/occupation, age, gender, expertise, etc., is calculated as R_x .

While we observe that the collective addends of the previous equation influence politeness, and thus commitment, in our speech acts, can we also say that each addend independently influences commitment in our speech? Further, if one or more do independently affect commitment

in our speech, do they affect commitment equally or disproportionately?

As a horizontal measurement of speaker/hearer relationship, social distance is a non-power continuum of interactive symmetry. Brown and Levinson assert that this measurement of symmetrical likenesses and/or contrasts is calculated according to "frequency of interaction" and "the kinds of material or non-material goods (including face) exchanged between S and H" (p. 77). On one end of the spectrum is greater social distance that includes speaker/hearer relationships having the least frequency of interaction and the greatest contrast of exchanged goods (such as might occur between speakers with contrastive dialects, ethnic values, ages, occupations, etc.). At the opposite end of the continuum, social closeness, speaker/hearer relationships have the greatest commonality and frequency of exchanges. "The reflex of social closeness," Brown and Levinson propose, "is, generally, the giving and receiving of positive face" (p. 77). By applying the previous reflex principle to commitment in our speech (with deference to Chen's unification of positive and negative face superstrategies), I propose that speakers of greater social distance will tend to utter greater positive

and negative SFTA's, taking wide latitude to avoid (even not to keep) absolute commitment. In contrast, speakers of strong social propinquity will tend to utter (and to keep) commitment to *other* as a face-giving reflex. For example, upon my best friend's request, I would be inclined to utter absolute commitment, whereas upon the request of an acquaintance, I might have greater tendency to decline commitment, either baldly or with redress. Thus, I hypothesize that social distance, or horizontal relationship, does independently influence commitment in our speech.

In addition to horizontal relationships, we also observe vertical, or power relationships between interlocuters (Brown and Levinson's second addend, *P*). These asymmetrical relationships are based upon "material control (over economic distribution and physical force)" and "metaphysical control (over the actions of others, by virtue of metaphysical forces subscribed to by those others)" (p. 77), whether sanctioned or unsanctioned, intersecting or non-intersecting. Accordingly, Scollon and Scollon (1981) refer to power manifestations among speakers as "superordinate" over "subordinate" roles in the presentation of self [e.g., elder over younger, teacher

over student, employer over employee, husband over wife (traditionally), parent over child, etc.] Moreover, Scollon and Scollon assert that the superordinate role entails *dominance* and *spectatorship* of the subordinate, whereas the expectation of the subordinate role is *exhibitionism* and *dependence*. Therefore, "as S's power over H increases, the weightiness of (an) FTA diminishes" (Brown and Levinson, p. 78). For as the speaker or superordinate's power increases over the subordinate hearer, so does the dominant's imposition upon and expectation from the hearer, e.g. employer/employee relationship.

Building upon the preceding foundation, I propose that as the power of the speaker (superordinate) over the hearer (subordinate) increases, so does the weightiness of the SFTA to the hearer. Of application to commitment in our speech, I hypothesize the following: as the power of the speaker requesting commitment increases over the hearer, the greater the hearer will tend to make (and to keep) absolute commitment. Conversely, however, I ask: would the superordinate's commitment toward the subordinate be the same? If not, how would commitment vary?

Thirdly, Brown and Levinson's politeness equation includes the element of cultural significance in our

speech. Hudson (1996) asserts a merger between "language" and "social constraints on speech" (p. 108). Moreover, he maintains,

Society controls our speech in two ways. Firstly, by providing a set of *norms* . . . Secondly, society provides the *motivation* for adhering to these norms . . . In addition to controlling it in these two ways, society takes a great interest in speech, and in particular provides a set of concepts for thinking and talking about it (pp. 119-120).

Specific to commitment in our speech, cultural norms, as referred to by Hudson, constrain explicitness in language. For example, Keenan (1974) observes intentional ambiguity as a norm in Malagasy society. New information is perceived as a peculiar treasure, giving prestige to the person who solely possesses it. Thus, specific information generally is not provided upon request; rather, an elusive response is the norm. Further, the uttering of specific identities and references is believed to bring bad omen upon that which is specified and "tsiny" guilt upon the speaker. The consequence of this belief upon Malagasy explicitness is three fold. First, Malagasy speakers avoid addressing persons and identifying sources by given name.

Second, speakers hesitate to talk specifically about past events. Third, speakers are extremely reluctant to utter future commitments. In sum, Keenan's research suggests that Malagasy speakers seemingly prefer to use non-committal speech.

Similarly, Scollon and Scollon (1981) observe contrasts between American English and Athabaskan speakers. The researchers report that whereas explicitness and commitment to past and future events is culturally appropriate among American English speakers, Athabaskan speech reflects the practice of a *Reduction Principle*, i.e., the reduction of self. Thereby, Athabaskan speakers perceive illocutions that directly state or commit to future events to be culturally unacceptable, bringing "bad luck". Specific favorable recounting of past events is also avoided.

Thus, in light of the previous Malagasy and Athabaskan linguistic contrasts to English discourse and given that language acquisition theory affirms the phenomenon of first language transfer into second languages (Gass & Selinker, 2001), I hypothesize that native language influences speaker commitment among English speakers.

Finally, the merger of cultural constraints and language (Hudson, 1996, previously cited) also imposes expectations of gender in language. Hudson writes, "As far as speakers are concerned, the commonest characteristics to be reflected by specific linguistic items is sex" (p. 121). Further, he asserts that male speakers are oriented toward power. In contrast, female speakers are solidarity purposed. Interestingly, the researcher considers the motivation of power to disadvantage the male speaker in the home where "rapport-speaking" is key to private family relationships, and perceives the solidarity motivation of the female speaker to be disadvantageous in the workplace wherein oral presentations and committee deliberations are required. Accordingly, Coates (1986) asserts that men and women "differ...in their sense of what is appropriate for them as speakers" (p. 123). Citing Lakoff (1975), she additionally states, "Women are perceived as expressing themselves in a more tentative way than men," i.e. less committal (P. 103).

However, the "tentativeness" of female speech in sociolinguistic theory is highly controversial. O'Barr and Atkins (1980; cited in Coates, 1986) refute Lakoff's (1975) assertion regarding the so-called female tentativeness

(modality) in speech. For O'Barr and Atkins observe that courtroom speech is influenced by two primary factors: a speaker's social status and previous courtroom experience, not by gender. As further argument against predominate tentativeness in female speech, Holmes (1984) reports greater modality and mitigation in men's tag questions than in women's (see Table 1.2 below). Further, the women's speech contains nearly twice the percentage of affective tags as the men's.

Table 1.2. Gender: Tag Questions

	Epistemic (Modality)	Affective	Mitigative
Men	61%	25%	13%
Women	35%	59%	6%
(Holmes, 1984)			

Does, then, gender truly influence tentativeness or, contrastively, commitment in our speech? I hypothesize that it does, but only for isolated occasions or functions.

CHAPTER TWO

MODALS: TRUTH AND COMMITMENT

"There is, perhaps, no area of English grammar that is both more important and more difficult than the system of modals." (Palmer, 1979, cited in Washington, 1991, p. 1)

"Modality, like negation or questions, is apparently a linguistic universal. One can say that it appears in all languages (in different ways) or even that any language without it would be 'impossible'."
(Washington, 1991, p.1)

Introduction

In chapter one, we defined speaker commitment in speech acts and examined various influences and constraints upon our commitment to our speech. Certainly and practically, however, the entirety of our speech is not comprised exclusively of absolute commitment. For example, consider the following excerpts/citations from the historical 2000 Presidential Election campaign speeches and debates (Note: italics are my emphasis). George W. Bush argued the need to improve education, "We *must* not leave one child behind" (Republican National Convention, televised August 3, 2000). He further asserted in the first Presidential Debate, "I believe that if we find poor children trapped in schools that *won't* teach, we *need* to free the parents," (New York Times, October 5, 2000) to

which Al Gore rebutted, "I don't think private schools *should* have a right to take taxpayer money away from public schools." Concerning gun control, Al Gore postured, "None of my proposals *would* have an effect on hunters or people who use rifles" (New York Times, October 19, 2000). On the issue of medical care Mr. Gore proposed, "I think we *ought* to have a patients' bill of rights." Mr. Bush countered, "If I'm the president, we're *going to* have emergency room care, we're *going to* have gag orders, women *will* have direct access to OB-GYN, people *will be able to* take their insurance company to court" (New York Times, October 18, 2000). When questioned regarding the selection of U.S. Supreme Court justices Governor Bush declared, "I believe in strict constructionists, and those are the kind of judges I *will* appoint." Vice President Gore contested, "The constitution *ought to* be interpreted as a document that grows with our country and our history (New York Times, October 5, 2000).

In similar discourse following the election, on November 21, 2000, the Supreme Court of Florida ruled on arguments which hinged upon two words, *shall* and *may*, in Florida's statutes and election rules. Effectively, the Justices ruled unanimously that *may* in relationship to the

discretionary provision of authority granted to Florida's Secretary of State supersedes *shall* referent to Florida's Constitutional mandate to certify votes (Hannity and Colmes, November 21, 2000).

Woven throughout the previous rhetorical garment of the 2000 Presidential Election is a common grammatical and elocutionary thread, *modality*. Modality is defined as "that classification of propositions based on whether they assert or deny the possibility, impossibility, contingency, or necessity of their content" (American Heritage College Dictionary, 1997, p. 876). Rhetorically, modality may be expressed in diverse constructions including, but not limited to, 1) Core modals and/or semi-auxiliaries, 2) Lexical verbs (particularly opinion referents), 3) Adverbs and sentence modifiers, 4) Imperative and/or subjunctive moods, 5) Non-linguistic cues, 6) Vocal inflection, and 7) Truth-opposition statements such as sarcasm, etc. (Berk, 1999; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Grice, 1990; Shiffrin, 1990). Thus, it follows that modality in the English language is applied multifariously: to speculate, hedge, mitigate, predict, suggest or assert advice, mandate, request, and express hopes and/or desires.

The focus of this chapter, however, will be narrowed in scope to the first of modality constructions listed, *core modals* and *semi-auxiliaries* such as those highlighted in the afore political context. Specifically, I will present their identification and meanings/functions followed by a pragmatic survey of commitment and truth in modal usage in Chapter 3.

Identification

We have already observed that modals play an integral part in the political context of promises, debate, and law. Moreover, Washington (1991) asserts that it is impossible to express making plans, predicting future events, or creating possible worlds (irrealis) without modals. Thus, the question follows, how then can we aptly identify and appropriate modals in daily discourse?

Modals may be divided into two classifications, core modals (true modals) and semi-auxiliaries, also referred to as phrasal, periphrastic, pseudo and quasi-modals (Berk, 1999; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Jacobs, 1995). Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) define *core modals* as "*tenseless auxiliaries that take no subject-verb agreement and no infinitive to before the following verb*" (p. 137).

Berk (1999) characterizes these modals as "*semantically rich and inflectionally impoverished... (they) carry no third person present {-s} ending...and they have no past participle forms, no present participle forms, and no infinitive forms*" (p. 132).

Core modals traditionally have been divided into two forms, those that historically were present tense and their historically past tense forms. These terms currently imply semantic purpose (to be discussed later) rather than standard tense.

Table 2.1. Core Modals

<u>Historically Present Tense</u>	<u>Historically Past Tense</u>
shall	should
will	would
can	could
may	might
mot (lost during Middle English)	must
--	ought (to)
[need]	
[dare]	

Note: [] requires negative and/or interrogative constructions

In Table 2.1 above, we observe that the historically past tense was constructed by Old English "root vowel alternation" (Matthews, 1996, p. 364) and the appendage of {-d} or {-t} past tense suffixes to the historical present (Berk, 1999). Hence, The historically past tense of *shall* is *should* and the historically past tense of *will* is *would*, etc.

For every core modal there is a phrasal modal (PM) counterpart as illustrated in Table 2.2 below. Jacobs (1995) refers to these modal counterparts as periphrastic modals because they "*paraphrase (core) modal meanings*" (p. 217). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) best define *phrasal modals* as "*multiword forms ending in infinitive to, which function semantically like true modals (in certain of their meanings)*" (p. 138). Berk (1999) adds that such modals usually begin with be, carry tense and subject-verb agreement (with the exception of *used to* and *had better*), and allow the present and past participle forms of aspect. The tense and subject-verb agreement is inflected on *be*, *have*, or the *head verb* (except PM's that have incorporated the true modal *would*). Further, tense and modality may be added on the same verb form. Adverbs other than the negative *not* may not separate PM word components.

Table 2.2. Modal Counterparts

<u>Core</u>	<u>Phrasal</u>
shall	obliged to
will	be going to, be about to
may, might	be allowed to, be permitted to
can, could	be able to
must	have to, have got to
should, ought (to)	be to, be supposed to
would (past habit)	used to

Other semi-auxiliaries that have been accepted as modals in contemporary English include: be sure to, be bound to, be (un)likely to, be certain to, be (un)willing to, be due to, seems to, appears to be, need to, want to, had better, had best, would rather, would prefer to, and would like to.

(Berk, 1999; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; and Jacobs, 1995)

Remarkably, phrasal modals, particularly those ending in *to*, possess a strong enough semantic tie between *to* and the word immediately preceding, that the two words actually become one lexical unit in casual daily speech. Thereby, *have to* becomes "hafta," *got to* becomes "gotta," *going to* converts to "gonna," and *need to* is often spoken "needsta," etc. (Jacobs, 1995)

Meanings and Functions

Having identified modals, we turn our attention to their meaning and function. Modals present five semantic

potentials: 1) alternative state(s) of the subject, 2) intimation of time, 3) antithesis of tense, 4) epistemic inference, and 5) deontic assertion. First, Washington (1991) informs that modals project *alternative subject states* (states that are non-existent at the present place and time) that regular verbs do not. Regular verbs present the subject of a sentence in its actual state. Further, a regular verb limits its subject to only one actual state. For example, *John is the son of Dr. and Mrs. Larson*. The former sentence expresses that John, the subject, clearly belongs to the Larsons. His belonging to the Larsons is his sole actual state. The verb *is* neither implies or allows any other state for John. In contrast, modals can imply a representation of many *possible* alternative subject states. For example, *John may be the son of Dr. and Mrs. Larson*. The modal *may* in this example allows multiple alternative states of the subject. For it is possible that John is the Larson's son; it is also possible that John is not. Moreover, he may be the son of any number of people, i.e. the Smith's, the Blake's, the Teller's, etc.

Not only do modals have the ability to imply possible alternative states, but they can also suggest *necessary* alternative states "*different from the present, actual one*"

(Washington, 1991, p. 4; see also Hinkel, 1995). Consider the following sentences:

(1) Dan and Shelley must make a shopping list before going to Albertson's.

(2) Mary should do her homework.

Both sentences express the need for a subject state other than the present, actual one. In sentence 1, Dan and Shelley have not actually made a shopping list. However, *must* suggests a necessary change of state prior to shopping, i.e., the making of a shopping list. Sentence 2 represents Mary's present actual state as not having done her homework. *Should* manifests a necessary, different state for Mary, i.e., doing her homework. The suggested alternative state also implies alternative outcome(s). For example, sentence 2 expresses that Mary's necessary alternative state, doing homework, would have different results (i.e., better grades, different responses from her parents and teacher, etc.) than her present actual state of not having done her homework. Conclusively, having observed the semantic implications of the possible versus the necessary alternative states, "*deciding between the*

possible and necessary," then, is *"basic to the way a writer (or speaker) chooses to represent the alternate state"* (Washington, 1991, p. 9).

In addition to presenting alternative states, modals also intimate *time*--past, present and future--for such states. Past modality may be expressed by usage of a modal followed by *have* and a main verb in {-en} or {-ed} past participle construction (perfect aspect). For example, *Dan might have gone home*. As previously demonstrated, *might* expresses alternative states for the subject, Dan. Additionally, the modal *might* in conjunction with *have gone* (the present perfect aspect of *go*) expresses that the alternative states of going home or going somewhere else occurred in the indefinite past.

Traditionally, present time has generally been indicated by the use of an historically past tense modal followed by a bare infinitive (infinitive without *to*), although contemporary English is incorporating historically present forms also. Consider the sentence, *That could be Dan at the door*. Again, the modal *could* suggests alternative states for *That*. Furthermore, historically past *could* followed by the bare infinitive *be* intimates the present tense for those alternative states. For we may

insert an adverb of present time and maintain the exact sentence meaning: *That could be Dan at the door (now).*

The third meaning of time, the *future*, is expressed by the use of an historically present tense modal immediately followed by a bare infinitive. In the sentence, *Darla will have to leave soon in order to get to the library before it closes.*, Darla is not at the library at the present time. *Will have to* presents an alternative state of necessity for Darla (i.e., getting to the library before it closes), which if it is actually to take place, will take place in the indefinite future. Thus, we observe that commitment in speech acts may include a modal referent to past, present, or future time.

Although we have observed time referents for modality, modals are *antithetical to regular tensed verbs, semantically*. For modals uniquely enable the speaker to interpose subjective interjections of his/her perception, proposition and/or perspective on discourse that the use of regular present or past tense verbs does not allow. Modals may convey the speaker's attitudes, politeness, indirect inferences (such as indirect requests), assertiveness (e.g., advice), consent/approval, alternatives to yes or no responses, and degree of probability/possibility,

certainty, or commitment (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Washington, 1991). Contrast the following sentences:

(3) Sam is an engineer.

(4) Sam might be an engineer.

The tense inflected copula in sentence (3) states only present fact that Sam's occupation indeed is that of an engineer. However, the modal *might* in sentence (4) interjects the speaker's degree of certainty/uncertainty that Sam is an engineer. And in so doing, the statement moves from a factual account to a proposition of the speaker's subjective conjecture, which lacks speaker commitment to the proposition as being truth.

"The ways in which speakers indicate their degree of commitment to the truth of a given proposition" is referred to as *epistemic* meaning (Berk, 1999, p. 130). Commitment to the truth may take the form of *absolute* modality [Matthews' (1996) poles of necessity, certainty and impossibility] or *relative* modality (degrees of possibility, probability and improbability that exist between the absolute poles). In the sentence *Mike will win the race*, the modal *will* expresses the speaker's positive assertion of high probability. In contrast, *Mike could win the race* suggests, through the modal *could*, the speaker's

positive assertion of low probability. Relative modality between the two degrees of commitment is expressed by statements such as *Mike should win the race, Mike may win the race, and Mike might win the race (from highest to lowest probability)*. Negative assertions of uncertainty, improbability and impossibility are stated with the adverb not or prefixes such as {un-} and {im-}, as in the phrasal modal *is unlikely to*. *The package might not arrive on time* expresses negative assertion of low possibility. The negative assertion of impossibility is stated *The package can't arrive on time*. Modality between these extremes may be expressed (from highest to lowest possibility) *The package may not arrive on time, The package is unlikely to arrive on time, and The package won't arrive on time*. The following model (Table 2.3) is a helpful characterization of epistemic usage.

Table 2.3. Epistemic Usages

may	predict.	Potentialis	subjective	relative modality
	concess.	potentialis	subjective	relative modality
can		realis	objective	relative modality
will		potentialis	subjective	positive assertion
must		potentialis	subjective	absolute modality
have/got to		realis	objective	absolute modality
might		irrealis	subjective	relative modality
		potentialis	subjective	-relative modality
could		potentialis/ irrealis	objective	relative modality
would		irrealis	(?)	positive assertion
should		potentialis	subjective	-absolute modality positive assertion
ought		potentialis	objective	-modality
(Matthews, 1996, p. 373)				(- =downgraded)

In contrast to epistemic meaning and function, modals may also be used to express *deontic* meaning (also called *root modality*) by asserting directives or volition for potential action. Berk (1999) defines *directives* as "*any utterance in which a speaker tries to get someone else to behave in a particular way*" (p. 131). Examples include giving or requesting advice or permission; soliciting commitment; and asserting mandate/prohibition, instruction, or reprimand.

- Examples:
- (6) What should/can I do? (requesting advice)
 - (7) You should/could invest in long-term options. (giving advice)
 - (8) May I leave now? (requesting permission)
 - (9) You may take a break. (giving permission)
 - (10) Will you go with me? (soliciting commitment)
 - (11) You must/will do your homework. (mandate)
 - (12) You should circle the correct answer.
(instruction)
 - (13) You should have called. (reprimand)

Deontic *volition* encompasses the utterance of commitment (agreement or promise), intention (including threats), desire, willingness (i.e., making an offer or invitation), or preference.

- Examples:
- (14) I will pick you up at 8:00. (commitment)
 - (15) I'm going to keep trying. (intention)
 - (16) She would like to order now. (desire)
 - (17) I would be happy to help you. (willingness)
 - (18) Carla would rather sleep than eat.
(preference)

Matthews (1996) reports the following representation of deontic usage (p. 373).

Table 2.4. Deontic Usages

may	potentialis	subjective	relative modality
can	realis	objective	relative modality
must	potentialis	subjective	absolute modality
shall *	potentialis	subjective	absolute modality
	potentialis	subjective	positive assertion
will	potentialis	objective	positive assertion
have/got to	realis	objective	absolute modality
might	irrealis	subjective	relative modality
could	irrealis	objective	relative modality
should	potentialis	subjective	-absolute modality
	irrealis	subjective	.-absolute modality
ought (to)	potentialis	objective	-absolute modality
(* used deontically only)			(- =downgraded)

As a noteworthy exception to Matthew's representation (Figure 2.4), not only does *will* imply positive assertion, *will* also carries meaning of absolute modality. Coates (1983) attributes meanings of intention and willingness to deontic, volitional *will*. Jacobs (1995) also asserts, "*will* indicates *intention*," and continues, "Intention is the imposition upon 'oneself' of an obligation to take some

action" (P. 227). For example, *Will you marry me? Yes, I will marry you.* As (self or other) imposed obligation, i.e., promise or commitment, *will* is absolute modality.

Lastly, in the discussion of meanings/functions of modals, consideration is given to the contrastive function of modals in quoted versus reported speech. Historically present modals are used to *quote actual speech* of others for the purpose of preserving the speech integrity (perception, propositional intent, and/or perspective) of the one being quoted (Berk, 1999; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Matthews, 1996). For example, *Miss Reeves said, "I will collect your assignment at the beginning of class tomorrow."* Herein, the quoter commits him/herself to a representation of truth to the other's speech.

Contrastively, modals that were historically past tense, are applied to *reported speech* (Berk, 1999; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Matthews, 1996). The speaker chooses to assign reported speech to another's discourse in order to create a means through which he/she may interpose his/her personal opinion, emotion, and inferences about the other's speech. Reported speech, then, is relayed in the form *David told me that he would help if he weren't too busy on Monday.* We may observe from

this example that reported speech allows the reporter 1) to distance him/herself from a commitment to truth of the other's speech and 2) to incorporate relativity and subjectivity into the same.

CHAPTER THREE

SURVEY

Introduction

In a televised discussion with Fox News host Tony Snow (November 25, 2000), regarding the ongoing Presidential contest, Jim Pinkerton of Newsday compared current American values to Einstein's "Theory of Relativity." He states, *"There are no absolutes! ... The relative of the circumstance and the moment dictates the truth."* Having contemplated Mr. Pinkerton's statement, I ponder whether his assertion regarding current American values might accurately reflect our spoken American English language with particular respect to modal usage. Accordingly, as an experiment of research to investigate propositional truth and commitment in modal usage, I pose the following questions for survey:

1. Do speakers express absolute commitment through modal usage? If culture is reflected in language (Hinkel, 1995), do Matthew's (1996) poles of absolute modality and Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman's (1999) modal commitment to certainty remain?

2. What modals do speakers perceive to convey the strongest and weakest degree/meanings of commitment?
3. Do speakers prefer the directness of the positive assertion *can* or the distancing, yet polite form *could* when speaking commitment?
4. Does the usage of *can* versus *could* change the degree/meaning of a speaker's commitment in speech?
5. How do speakers' perceptions of commitment through the use of the modal *will* relate to relationships between speakers and hearers?
6. Are age, gender, occupation, and/or native language relational to the degree and/or propositional truth of commitment in speech?
7. Are speakers' perceptions of their level of commitments consistent with or variant to their reported actual keeping of commitments?
8. Do speakers use the phrasal modal *need to* consistently in daily discourse to mean literally *necessity*?

Method

As a medium to acquire unprejudiced data, a 16 question written survey, primarily multiple choice, was created. (See Appendix A) In an effort not to bias or limit speakers' preference, in each of the multiple choice survey questions respondents are asked whether they prefer to say *other/write in*, as well as to write the reason for their stated preference. To elicit an answer to research question 1, *Do speakers use modals to express absolute commitment?*, the survey's multiple-choice questions offer the following options: absolute commitment, relative degrees of commitment between absolute commitment and non-commitment, and *other/write in* (Exception: these options are non-applicable to multiple-choice question #13). In order to observe which modals speakers perceive to convey the strongest and weakest degrees/meanings of commitment (research question 2), survey questions #1 and 7 ask the respondents to rate modals from the strongest to the weakest meaning of commitment as they would use the modals in daily speech. To inquire whether speakers prefer to utter commitment by direct assertion or polite distancing (research question 3), survey question #3 directly asks respondents their preference for saying *can* or *could* when

speaking commitment. Survey questions #5 and 10 are devoted to answering research question 4 with respect to the respondent's intended degree/meaning of commitment through the use of *can* versus *could* in daily conversation. Survey question #5 asks the respondents what degree of commitment they mean when saying *I can help you tomorrow*; likewise survey question #10 asks the respondents what degree of commitment they mean when saying *I could help you tomorrow*. In effort to answer research question 5, *How do speakers' perceptions of commitment through the use of the modal "will" relate to relationships between speakers and hearers*, survey questions #2, 6, 8, and 11 ask the respondents what they mean when saying *I will do it* respectively to an employer, employee, friend or co-worker, and casual acquaintance. Survey question #15 directly asks respondents their age, gender, occupation, and native language; responses have been crosstabbed against each responses to each question in the survey in order to answer research question 6, *Are age, gender, occupation, and/or native language relational to the degree and/or propositional truth of commitment in speech*. In an attempt to evaluate whether speakers' perceptions of their level of commitments are consistent with or variant to their

reported actual keeping of commitments (research question 7), survey questions #12, 14, and 16 respectively ask respondents whether in the past year they have uttered commitment but failed to keep their commitment, the frequency that they utter commitment but fail to keep their commitment, and the degree of commitment that they prefer to make. The responses to survey questions #12, 14, and 16 are compared/contrasted. Finally, the aim of research question 8 was to observe whether *need to* is consistently spoken with the literal intended meaning of *necessity*; accordingly, survey question #9 asks respondents what they meant by *need to* the last time they told their employer that they *needed to take time off*. The survey was reviewed by two California State University (San Bernardino, CA) English professors and graduate peers prior to distribution to the public.

A total of sixty-eight persons were surveyed; of the sixty-eight surveys returned, three were incomplete and were necessarily set aside. Thus, the percentages and numbers of this report are based on a total population of 65 persons. This population is defined by the following: 43% ages 18-25, 37% ages 26-45, 19% ages 46 or older; 40% male and 60% female; non-native English speakers 19% (1.5%

Czech, 3% Spanish, 3% Korean, 1.5% Japanese, 5% Chinese, 1.5% Russian, 1.5% Vietnamese). Three percent declined to answer *native language*.

Sampling of five populations and/or sites was chosen in an attempt to gather an honest, integrous representation of the general public. Sites selected for survey include Wal-mart's main exit (Hemet, CA; 17 persons surveyed) and California State University's Student Commons (20 persons surveyed) and University Hall (10 persons surveyed). Persons surveyed at the Student Commons and University Hall are of diverse majors/disciplines other than English. Additional respondents include acquaintances and friends (non-university, 6 persons surveyed) and volunteers of a graduate multilingual English class (12 persons surveyed). These volunteers are English proficient, but have not been biased by classroom instruction specific to modals.

Surveys were distributed and collected by myself; there were no intermediaries. Respondents completed the surveys in my presence at the time of distribution to them. Further, individuals did not collaborate or discuss the questions with others.

Findings were hand calculated twice for accuracy. Additionally, statistical frequencies and Pearson chi-

square cross tab probabilities (seeking $P=0.05$ or less) were tabulated using SPSS 10.0 application.

Findings

To test the respondents' perceptions of which modals convey the strongest and weakest degree/meanings of commitment, question one of the survey asks participants to rate the modals *can*, *will*, and *may*, in the order of probability and/or commitment as the participant would use them in daily conversation. In Table 3.1 below, we notice that greater than three-fourths of the surveyed population perceive *will* as meaning the strongest commitment of the three modals, which is consistent with Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) and Jacobs (1995).

However, we observe particular disparity with regard to *can*. Whereas Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman and Jacobs ascribe greater certainty to *may* over *can*, three-fifths of the surveyed participants attribute greater certainty to *can* over *may*. Moreover, an unexpected 20.6% of the participants evaluate *can* as communicating stronger commitment than *will*.

Table 3.1. Commitment Strength I

	Strongest		Mid		Weakest	
	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Valid %</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Valid %</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Valid %</u>
Will	47	77.0%	9	14.8%	5	8.2%
Can	13	20.6%	39	61.9%	11	17.5%
May	6	9.7%	12	19.4%	44	71.0%

Further, with respect to *can* and in response to question #5 of the survey, *When saying, "I 'can' help you tomorrow," what do you mean?*, an overwhelming 69.2% replied absolute commitment, rather than probable or possible commitment.

Moreover, in question #3, participants were asked their preferences for saying *can* or *could* in daily conversation. Deference (nearly 70%) was given to the directness of the positive assertion *I can* over the distant, albeit polite form, *I could* (10.8%). [The remaining participants answered *other*.] However, in answer to question 10, *When saying, "I 'could' help you tomorrow," what do you mean?*, forty percent still indicated absolute commitment, as opposed to lesser commitment.

Desiring to be cautious about generalizations, I question whether the divergence of *can* from published theory and grammar texts is an isolated movement among survey participants or whether the disparity would extend

beyond the population surveyed. Future study of the modal may be warranted to determine if there is a moving trend from weak to strong commitment in the practical meaning and usage of *can*.

To further test the respondents' perceptions of which modals convey the strongest and weakest degree of commitment in speech, question #7 of the survey was set forth. Similar to question #1 (previously discussed), participants were asked to rate the modals *could*, *should*, *might*, *ought*, and *must* from strongest to weakest probability and commitment used in their daily language. In Table 3.2 below, we first observe discordant use of *must*. The majority (55.2%) of respondents use *must* in their daily speech as the strongest commitment modal among the five. On the other hand, *must* also is used as the weakest modal by approximately one-third (32.8%) of the participants surveyed. Second, reiterating the unanticipated strength of *can*, nearly one-fourth (23.3%) surveyed use *could*, the historically past tense of *can*, as meaning stronger commitment than *must*. In fact, nearly 75% of respondents use *can* (the modal to which weakness is theoretically attributed) to mean mid to strongest certainty and commitment of the five modals. Whereas half

(51.7%) of the respondents use *should* for speaking strong self-commitment (slightly less than the absolute certainty attributed to *must*), 25% use *can* for stronger commitment than *should*. Fourth, *ought* is congruently spoken as mid to weak commitment. Lastly, the most frequent (nearly 75%) use of *might* is equably spread throughout the mid to weakest end of the continuum.

Table 3.2. Commitment Strength II

	1		2		3		4		5	
	<u>Strongest</u>		<u>Strong</u>		<u>Mid</u>		<u>Weak</u>		<u>Weakest</u>	
	F	VP	F	VP	F	VP	F	VP	F	VP
Must	32	55.2%	4	6.9%	2	3.4%	1	1.7%	19	32.8%
Could	14	23.3%	15	25.0%	14	23.3%	9	15.0%	8	13.3%
Might	9	15.0%	9	15.0%	13	21.7%	15	25.0%	14	23.3%
Should	5	8.6%	30	51.7%	14	24.1%	8	13.8%	1	1.7%
Ought	2	3.4%	7	12.1%	19	32.8%	23	39.7%	7	12.1%

In comparison, Jacobs (1995) and Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) suggest the following parallel continuums (Table 3.3 below) for the previous modals, attributing strongest commitment and certainty to *must*, and conversely, weakest commitment to *could* (*can*) and *might*.

Table 3.3. Theoretical Commitment Strength

<u>Jacobs</u>	Celce-Murcia & <u>Larsen-Freeman</u>
Strongest	High Certainty
Must	Must
Should	Should, ought
Ought	Could, might
Could	Low Certainty
Might	
Weakest	

Having reviewed the participants' stated evaluation of modals as they pertain to probability and commitment in their daily speech, we now turn our attention to survey questions #2, 6, 8, and 11 to examine any relationships between commitment and speaker/hearer relationship. Table 3.4 on the following page illustrates the diverse speaker commitment toward hearers of four differing relationships with the speaker: employer, co-worker/friend, family, and casual acquaintance. The results were obtained by asking *What do you mean by "I will?"* when speaking to persons of each relationship. In the speech of 55% of participants surveyed, commitment is affected by speaker/addressee relationship.

Table 3.4. Relationship Correlation

	Q2		Q6		Q8		Q11	
	<u>To Employer</u>		<u>To Friend/ Co-worker</u>		<u>To Family</u>		<u>To Casual Acquaintance</u>	
	F	VP	F	VP	F	VP	F	VP
Absolute	43	67.2%	38	58.5%	37	56.9	27	41.5%
Commitment, providing...	20	31.3%	26	40.0%	21	32.3%	23	35.4%
Probable	0	0.0%	1	1.5%	5	7.7%	7	10.8%
Possible	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	3.1%	8	12.3%
Other	1	1.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

Table 3.4 above suggests a decline of absolute commitment as the relationship between speaker and addressee becomes more familiar and less power oriented. First, we observe that the greatest frequency (67.2%) of absolute commitment occurs in the vertical, power relationship of an employee (subordinate) speaking to an *employer* (superordinate). We also note the absence of relative (i.e., probable and possible) commitment to the employer. Comparatively, absolute commitment spoken to a friend/co-worker, declines by nearly ten percent--from a percentage of 67% (to employer) to 58.5% (to friend/co-worker), whereas frequency of provisional commitment to a friend/co-worker reciprocally increases by approximately the same percentage

from 31.3% (to employer) to 40% (to friend/co-worker).

Thus, among the surveyed participants, we observe a relationship between power and speaker commitment.

Additionally, a link between speaker commitment and horizontal, powerless relationships is notable among survey participants. Absolute commitment to addressees with whom the speaker has more frequent and intimate interaction and/or exchange (i.e., family, friends/co-workers) exceeds absolute commitment to socially distanced acquaintances by greater than 15%. Curiously, a greater frequency of tentative, provisional commitment is meant when speaking to friends/co-workers (40.0%) and casual acquaintances (35.4%) than when speaking to family members (32.3%). Also, commitment meanings of lesser degree, i.e., probable and possible, are intended when speaking to family and acquaintances; however, probable and possible commitments are essentially non-intended when speaking to friends/co-workers and employers.

In the previous paragraphs, we have discriminated the types of commitments spoken by respondents. However, do these speakers of English utter commitment truthfully? Do they keep their commitments? In answer to question 12 of the survey, nearly 75% admit to having broken commitments

spoken in the past year. (Note: One could reasonably argue an interpretive flexibility of 5% for unforeseen, uncontrollable events that might truly preclude a person from keeping a commitment.) When asked in question #13 to whom did you not keep your commitment(s), the greatest percentage was to family and friends, i.e., the more intimate relationships. On the other hand, power relationships in the workplace have the least frequency of broken commitments, of which, the percentage to employers is slightly higher than to employees. See Table 3.5 below.

Table 3.5. Broken Commitment(s) To Whom?

	F	VP
To family member	27	42.2%
To friend	22	34.4%
To acquaintance	21	32.8%
To co-worker	11	17.2%
To Employer	7	10.9%
To Employee	4	6.3%

To compare and contrast participants' perception of the degree/meaning of their spoken commitments against the actual degree/meaning of respondents' spoken commitments, two additional questions were asked: question 14, *What is*

the frequency that you tell someone "I will," but do not carry out the action? and question 16, Which (kind of commitment) do you generally prefer to make? An astounding 77.8% of participants state that they rarely break a spoken I "will" commitment (although 75% previously disclosed their actually having broken an I "will" commitment recently); 4.8% assert never. In comparison, nearly 70% of persons surveyed indicate their preference to make definite commitments, whereas 25% prefer to commit tentatively. Interestingly, approximately 5% state a preference for speaking no commitment(s).

Finally, we turn our attention to observe four variables age, gender, occupation, and native language in relation to commitment in speech. Each variable has been cross-tabbed throughout the survey to explore correlation, if any, between the variable and spoken commitment among the population surveyed.

Pearson chi-square testing indicates correlation between age range and the meaning/degree of commitment(s) spoken to employers and co-workers. First, we observe Table 3.6 below. When saying I will to an employer, nearly 83% of respondents in the age range 26-45 and 77% in the age range 46+ mean absolute commitment. Contrastively,

participants ages 18-25 intend nearly equal absolute (48%) and provisional (52%) commitment to their employers.

Table 3.6. Age Range: Spoken Commitment To Employer

	N=63		P=.015			
	<u>Ages 18-25</u>		<u>Ages 26-45</u>		<u>Ages 46+</u>	
	N=27		N=23		N=13	
	F	VP	F	VP	F	VP
Absolute	13	48.1%	19	82.6%	10	76.9%
Commitment, providing...	14	51.9%	4	17.4%	2	15.4%
Other	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	7.7%

Also significant, when saying *I will* to co-workers, approximately 70% of respondents in the age ranges of 26-45 and 46+ mean absolute commitment, compared to 39% of those ages 18-25, who intend absolute commitment and nearly 60% who mean relative commitment. (See Table 3.7 below.)

Table 3.7. Age Range: Spoken Commitment To Co-worker

N=64

P=.018

	<u>Ages 18-25</u>		<u>Ages 26-45</u>		<u>Ages 46+</u>	
	N=28		N=23		N=13	
	F	VP	F	VP	F	VP
Absolute	11	39.2%	17	73.9%	9	69.2%
Commitment, providing...	17	60.7%	6	26.0%	3	23.0%
Probable	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	7.7%

Second, age range is related to commitment kept to friends. As Table 3.8 below illustrates, the percentage of failed commitment declines as age range increases.

Table 3.8. Age Range: Failed Commitment(s) To Friends

N=63

P=.01

	<u>Ages 18-25</u>		<u>Ages 26-45</u>		<u>Ages 46+</u>	
	N=28		N=23		N=12	
	F	VP	F	VP	F	VP
	14	50.0%	8	34.8%	0	0.0%

In addition to age range, responses to question 10 of the survey suggest that a relationship exists between gender and commitment when using the "polite" modal *could*

(See Table 3.9 below). When saying, *I could help you tomorrow*, approximately 50% of the females surveyed mean absolute commitment. Contrastively, only 25% of the males speak with the same intended meaning.

Table 3.9. Gender: When Saying, "I Could"

N=65

P=.033

	<u>Male</u>		<u>Female</u>	
	N=24		N=41	
	F	VP	F	VP
You can count on my help.	6	25.0%	20	48.8%
My help is probable.	2	8.3%	8	19.5%
My help is possible.	9	37.5%	8	19.5%
I'm considering helping you.	2	8.3%	3	7.3%
I'm saying this to appease you.	4	16.7%	0	0.0%
Other	1	4.2%	2	4.9%

Second, the intended meaning of stated commitments is congruent between male and female; however, the consistency between the females' perception of keeping commitments and their reported actual fulfillment of commitments is greater than that of males, whose *perception* of keeping their commitments is higher than their reported *actual* keeping of commitments. In Table 3.10 below, we find in response to

question 12 that nearly 80% of men surveyed admit to having broken a spoken commitment in the past year.

Table 3.10. Gender: Said, "I Will," But Didn't
N=64

<u>Male</u>		<u>Female</u>	
N=24		N=40	
F	VP	F	VP
19	79.2%	28	70.0%

However, in the following table (3.11), we observe that over 91% percent of males state that they *never* or *rarely* break a spoken commitment. In contrast, 70% of females surveyed admit to saying, "I will," in the past year, but did not keep the commitment (Table 3.10 above), which is closely consistent with 77.5% of females stating that they *rarely* say, "I will," but do not keep the commitment (Table 3.11 below). Interestingly though, no female respondents report *never* saying, "I will," but not keeping the commitment.

Table 3.11. Gender: Frequency to Say, "I Will," But Don't
N=63

	<u>Male</u>		<u>Female</u>	
	N=23		N=40	
	F	VP	F	VP
Never	3	13.0%	0	0.0%
Rarely	18	78.3%	31	77.5%
Occasionally	1	4.3%	5	12.5%
50% of time	1	4.3%	3	7.5%
Often (Greater than 50% of time)	0	0.0%	1	2.5%

A third variable, native language, *seemingly* influences the keeping of commitment to casual acquaintance among respondents. Table 3.12 below illustrates that whereas 75% of native English speaking respondents reported keeping spoken commitments to acquaintances in the previous year, only 42% of non-native English speaking respondents did so. (Note: The number of non-English speaking respondents totaled 12 or one-fifth of the respondents surveyed, a small, yet valid sample.) Variances in commitments to other relationships and modal meanings were not significant.

Table 3.12. Native Language: Commitments To Acquaintances

N=60

P=.026

	<u>Native Ss of English</u>		<u>Non-native Ss of English</u>	
	N=48		N=12	
	F	VP	F	VP
Kept	36	75.0%	5	41.7%
Broken	12	25.0%	7	58.3%

Fourth, no notable correlation between occupation and commitment in speech is observed; rather, strong correlation occurs between vertical, power relationships and participants' commitments as previously discussed.

Finally, we observe among respondents a divergence from a commitment to truth with regard to the literal, spoken usage of *need to*. Table 3.13 below illustrates that when last saying to employer, "I *need to* take time off," only 52.3% of the respondents meant *necessity*, whereas 40% last used the modal to mean *desire* or *want*. Subsequent studies would be required to determine if the afore findings would extend beyond the present population and/or demographics.

Table 3.13. To Employer: "Need To"

N=65

	F	VP
Necessary circumstances (health, death, etc.)	34	52.3%
Desired a break (day off or vacation)	18	27.7%
Wanted to go elsewhere (e.g., to a ballgame)	8	12.3%
Other	5	7.7%

Summary

Operatively, among a small majority (56%) of respondents, speaking and intending absolute commitment is a norm. The reciprocal, however, is that the meaning of *will* as a positively asserted absolute pole or a commitment to certainty has diminished to relative commitment (provisional, probable, possible, and other) among 44% of respondents surveyed. The intended degree/meaning of spoken commitment of 55% of respondents surveyed is affected by the relationship between the respondent and his/her hearer. Moreover, a vast discrepancy exists between the stated meaning/degree of commitment and the actual reported keeping of commitment. The stated preference of commitment type is congruent to the stated degree/meaning

of commitment to an employer only. Notwithstanding, incongruity appears between the respondents' perception of their keeping commitments and their reported actual reported fulfillment of commitments. (Conceivably, however, it is possible to break a commitment once in a year and accurately report *rarely* failing to keep one's commitments.)

We have observed through a study of variables that age range plays a significant role in both the degree/meaning of commitments expressed through the modal *will* and the respondents' perceptions of their actual keeping of commitments. Adults over the age of 26 demonstrate a higher degree/meaning of commitments through the modal *will*. Further, the frequency of commitments spoken and kept to a friend increases as age range increases.

Gender is a limited imposing variable. The intended meaning of stated commitments expressed through the modal *will* is congruent between male and female. However, when using the "polite," former past tense of *can*, i.e., *could*, the majority of females intend absolute commitment, whereas the greater majority of males intend relative commitment. Additionally, the consistency between the females' perception of keeping commitments and their

reported actual fulfillment of commitments is greater than that of males, whose perception of their keeping commitments is higher than their actual keeping of commitments. (As previously noted: conceivably, it is possible to break a commitment once in a year and accurately report *rarely* failing to keep one's commitments.)

With respect to the modal *will*, correlation is noted between native language and the respondents' reported keeping of commitments to acquaintances, although sampling is small. Whereas a greater majority of native English speaking participants reported keeping their commitments to acquaintances in the previous year, approximately the same percentage of non-native English speaking respondents reported their *not* keeping spoken commitments to casual acquaintances.

Occupation as a correlation variable has proven insignificant in this study.

However, relationships, power-oriented and social, draw considerable correlation with higher intended degree/meaning of commitments in speech as well as with a greater frequency of commitments kept.

The most striking find of the present research is the divergence of the respondents' daily usage of *can* from published theory and grammar texts. Almost one-fourth of persons surveyed use *can* as the strongest modal of speaker commitment; in other words, respondents employ its usage to mean stronger speaker commitment than *will*. Additionally, *could*, the modal that historically was the past tense of *can*, is used by nearly 25% of respondents to mean stronger speaker commitment than *must*. Further, approximately 70% of respondents mean mid to strongest commitment when they say, "I could." Desiring to be cautious about generalizations, I question whether this divergence of the meaning of *can* and its former past tense *could* from published theory and grammar texts is an isolated movement among survey participants, or whether the disparity extends beyond the surveyed population. Further study of *can* and *could* is warranted.

Discussion

General

In the introduction of the present thesis, two questions were posed: 1) If we as speakers of English circumvent commitment to the propositional truth in our

speech, do we genuinely practice speaking cooperatively in mutual commitment to truth? and 2) If we speak commitment but do not intend commitment, do we subtly speak lies? Moreover, we have discussed Grice's *Co-operative Principle* which states that conversation requires three co-operative elements: co-operative effort(s), common purpose (s), and mutually accepted direction between speaker(s) and hearer(s). Further, the *Co-operative Principle* includes a supermaxim of *Quality* which states, "make your contribution one that is true . . . Do not say what you believe to be false" and "Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence" (Grice, 1990). Therefore, speakers engaged in discourse assume mutually co-operative truth in exchanged utterances. The findings of this survey, however, reflect daily conversation that is contrary to the principles of co-operative truth. In fact, 75% of those surveyed admit to having spoken commitment in the last year, but not having kept it; 55% indicate that although they say *I will* (the modal to which absolute commitment is ascribed in modern theory), their intended meaning/degree (and consequently, propositional truth) of their spoken commitment(s) changes (without indication to the hearer) according to their relationship with the addressee. Thus,

we must acknowledge that we as speakers of English do not always demonstrate co-operative truth in our speech. Our individual speaker strategies, which are influenced and/or motivated by *self* or *other-politeness*, age, gender, native language/culture, and speaker-hearer relationship, seemingly lead us to variable effort(s), diverse purpose(s) and divergent direction(s). We speak one thing, yet we intend another meaning. However, the addressee hears the actual spoken word(s) and expects propositional truth, and thus, the fulfillment of that commitment which is spoken.

In addition to a divergence from co-operative truth, we observe discrepancies among respondents in modal meanings used in daily conversation. The two greatest examples in the survey findings are *can* and *must*. Although 77% of respondents use *will* as the strongest modal of commitment (among *can*, *will*, and *may*), more than 20% use *can* to mean strongest commitment. Of the modals *must*, *could*, *might*, *should*, and *ought*, only 55% use *must* to indicate strongest commitment, while nearly 33% use *must* to mean weakest commitment. Therefore, it is pragmatically conceivable in daily conversation that a speaker may use *can* as a modal of relative commitment, yet the hearer encodes *can* to mean absolute commitment, and so the

reciprocal (See Table 3.1). Likewise, a speaker may say *must* meaning strongest commitment while the hearer encodes *must* as weakest commitment (see Table 3.2). In such instances we would observe miscommunication rather than cooperative speech. Thus, sociolinguistically, implications for potential interpersonal and interethnic conflict become numerous if we cannot commonly discern whether a statement such as *I will...* is meant to be absolute or relative commitment.

Teaching English as a Second Language

Why should a study of modality and the avoidance of absolute commitment in speech acts be important to pedagogy, particularly to TESL? Palmer (1979) states, "There is, perhaps, no area of English grammar that is both more important and more difficult than the system of modals" (cited in Washington, 1991, p.1). Further, Washington (1991) proposes, "Modality [i.e., 'that classification of propositions based on whether they assert or deny the possibility, impossibility, contingency, or necessity of their content' (American Heritage College Dictionary, 1997, p. 876)], like negation or questions, is apparently a linguistic universal. One can say that it

appears in all languages (in different ways) or even that any language without it would be 'impossible'" (p.1). Pragmatically, in the common workplace, which includes both native and non-native speakers of English, Willing (1997) asserts that "modality is a crucially important enabling competence," particularly for problem solving; however, his study finds that non-native speakers "tended very often to be less sharply articulated than they could have been, due in large part to only rudimentary control of the indicators of modality" (p. 33). Thus, the need for second language learners' acquisition of modals is compelling.

Specific to modal acquisition, Linnell (1991), in her study of non-instructed versus instructed non-native speakers of English finds that ESL instruction is significant to the acquisition of complex grammars, specifically modals; instruction proved remarkably more effective than interaction. However, she asserts that ESL texts present a pragmatic instructional problem: current texts give grammatical instruction, but fail to include *sociolinguistic appropriateness* of grammatical structures such as modals. Hinkel (1995) also addresses the problem of sociolinguistic application and *context*. Citing Kasper (1997) Hinkel states, "German students of English are not

always aware of modality as a pragmatic category and often translate modal verb meanings from German into English without accounting for their differing contextual implication" (P. 326).

While I concur with the previous theorists and do not wish to minimize their concern, the present study may reflect (pending additional research and demographics) a more basic challenge for pedagogy: textbook modal meaning versus current practical daily usage of modals. If spoken words of commitment such as *I will . . .* are sometimes uttered to mean absolute commitment, yet at other times are intended to mean relative commitment, which model of speaker commitment will we set forth to students in the classroom — absolute or relative commitment? In practical daily application, which will we teach ESL students to enable them to express their own volition, intentions, and self-obligated commitments? How will we teach our students to discriminate whether absolute or relative commitment is intended by *other*?

In further pedagogical consideration, we observe that the semantics of modals differ greatly from other grammatical structures such as nouns, verbs, articles, and conjunctions, etc. which have commonly accepted, specific

and/or dedicated meanings. If I say the word *house*, I the speaker and the hearer as a general rule bear in mind a common schemata or definition of the noun. We know that a house consists of a floor, walls, a roof, window(s), and door(s); additionally, we commonly encode that it is a dwelling place for people (unless specified for dogs or birds). Likewise, a verb suggests a particular, definite action or state of being. An article discriminates nouns. A conjunction indicates defined co-ordination or subordination. On the other hand, modals -- unlike any other part of speech -- represent a continuum of degree, subjectivity and values, speaker intent, circumstance(s), and consequently, meaning. Thus, I ask, *Whose continuum do modals represent? The speaker's? The hearer's? The grammarian's?* Although current grammar texts suggest a standard continuum for modals, the present research indicates that respondents employ variant continuums 1) amongst themselves and 2) with particular disparity to recent grammar texts. At this juncture, advocates for a "textless" TESL classroom foreseeably might use the present research to argue against the accuracy, relevancy, and therefore, effectiveness of grammar text usage. However, before the pendulum is swung far left, I ask, without a

standard of common meaning (such as in grammar texts) can we teach co-operative discourse? Moreover, I ponder whether the absence of grammar texts in many classrooms during the past two and a half decades (survey age range 18-25) has contributed to the inconsistency of modal meaning in daily usage and/or in the keeping of commitments.

APPENDIX A:

SURVEY

SURVEY

1. Please rate the following in order of probability and/or commitment that you would mean when speaking. (strongest=1, weakest=3. If any mean the same to you, please mark them with the same number.)

_____ I can attend the event.
_____ I will attend the event.
_____ I may attend the event.
2. When saying to your employer, "I will do it," what do you mean by "I will"? (Please circle one.)

a. Absolute binding commitment
b. Commitment, providing other circumstances do not arise
c. A probable commitment
d. Other _____
3. Which do you prefer to say in daily conversation?

a. I can help you.
b. I could help you.
c. Other _____
4. Why do you prefer the above choice?
5. When saying, "I can help you tomorrow," what do you mean? (Please circle one.)

a. You can count on my help.
b. My help is probable.
c. My help is possible.
d. I'm considering helping you.
e. I'm saying this to appease you at the moment, but I really don't want or intend to help.

6. When saying to a family member, "I will do it," what do you mean by "I will"? (Please circle one.)
- a. Absolute binding commitment
 - b. Commitment, providing other circumstances do not arise
 - c. A probable commitment
 - d. A possible commitment
 - e. Other _____
7. Please rate the following in order of probability and/or commitment that you would mean when speaking. (strongest=1, weakest=5. If any mean the same to you, please rate them with the same number.)
- _____ I could attend the event.
 - _____ I should be able to attend the event.
 - _____ I might attend the event.
 - _____ I ought to be able to attend the event.
 - _____ I must attend the event.
8. When saying to a friend or co-worker, "I will do it," what do you mean by "I will"? (Please circle one.)
- a. Absolute binding commitment
 - b. Commitment, providing other circumstances do not arise
 - c. A probable commitment
 - d. A possible commitment
 - e. Other _____
9. The last time that you told your employer that you "needed to take time off," what did you mean? (Please circle one.)
- a. Other circumstance(s), such as health or a death, necessitated time away from the job.
 - b. You desired a break (day off or vacation) from the job.
 - c. You wanted to go elsewhere (e.g. to a ball game).
 - d. Other _____

10. When saying, "I could help you tomorrow," what do you mean? (Please circle one.)
- a. You can count on my help.
 - b. My help is probable.
 - c. My help is possible.
 - d. I'm considering helping you.
 - e. I'm saying this to appease you at the moment, but I really don't want or intend to help.
 - f. Other _____
11. When saying to a casual acquaintance, "I will do it," what do you mean by "I will"?
- a. Absolute binding commitment
 - b. Commitment, providing other circumstances do not arise
 - c. A probable commitment
 - d. A possible commitment
 - e. Other _____
12. Have you in the past year told anyone "I will," but did not carry out the action? YES/NO (Please circle your answer.)
13. If your answer was YES, to whom did you say "I will," but did not carry out the action? (Please circle all that apply.)
- a. Family member
 - b. Friend
 - c. Acquaintance
 - d. Co-worker
 - e. Employer
 - f. Employee
14. What is the frequency that you tell someone "I will," but do not carry out the action? (Please circle one.)
- a. Never
 - b. Rarely
 - c. Occasionally
 - d. 50% of the time
 - e. Often (greater than 50% of the time)

15. What is your age? _____ Sex? Male _____ or Female _____
Occupation? _____ Native language? _____

16. Which do you generally prefer to make? (Please circle one.)

- a. Definite commitments
- b. Tentative commitments
- c. Indefinite commitments
- d. No commitments
- e. Other _____

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